

**COMMUNICATION INTERVENTIONS IN COVID-19 CRISIS IN NIGERIA:
TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE MEDIA CAMPAIGN**

Effiong J. Udofia
Department of Mass Communication
Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua

Email: jonef1966@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Coronavirus is a pandemic disease that has caused a dramatic loss of human lives, presents unprecedented challenges to public health and food systems, ravages the struggling national economy, and threatens millions of livelihoods in Nigeria. This study assesses the influence of communication in the sustainable media campaign against Covid-19 and promotion of behaviors that are germane to the wellness of people in the society. Anchored on the Social Category Theory as the theoretical framework, the study builds on its assumption that a person's social category determines the media of communication he exposes himself to. The study concludes by emphasizing on the basic communication strategies that will enhance effective media campaigns and also create an overwhelming impact on the various socio-economic groups for robust results from the media campaign. The study recommends among others that to contain the spread of coronavirus, the government at all levels should employ all media of communication in the campaign for effective and widespread message delivery.

Keyword: Coronavirus, Communication, Public Enlightenment and Government

INTRODUCTION

The advances in communication largely through the development of information and communication technologies have increased the means for people to acquire knowledge and information. As communication improves, so do the conditions of people in any given society.

The fundamental reality of human existence is communication. It is the keystone in social organisation of the society and accumulation of knowledge about events in the society. In every society, the roles that communication plays in informing and educating the populace about events and trends in the environment are enormous. It thus, creates awareness of possible dangers and the means of preventing them, mobilizing people and encouraging support for participation in programmes for the general good of the people. Indeed, the role that communication performs in facilitating actions to influence change, can be seen in many economic, social and political spheres.

Today, the world is groaning under the weight of Covid-19. When attention is drawn to the high mortality rate and the devastated economy of the country as the result of Covid-19 pandemic, it is clear that without communication interventions, the chances of overcoming its challenges will be low. Poverty and illiteracy have constantly remained barriers to the consumption of mass media products in Nigeria. According to a study conducted between 2018 and 2019 by the National Bureau of Statistics with support from the World Bank's Poverty Global Practice, Nigeria's poverty rate as at 2020 stood at 40.1%; meaning that almost 85 million people live below the country's poverty line of N137,480 or \$381.78 per year (www.worldbank.org). In a similar vein, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics has revealed that the literacy rate of 15 years and above, between 1991 and 2021 is 62.02% (www.macrotrends.net). These apparent woeful conditions in the country have placed a heavy burden on the masses to consume mass media messages or access medical services. It is also noteworthy that these prevailing conditions under which people exist, can lead to apathy or misconceptions about Covid-19, increased health challenges, high mortality rate

and economic doldrums. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative that a holistic approach to communication be taken to ensure that the economically weak as well as the economically strong and the literate as well as the illiterate, are well exposed to communication activities for people to become more sensitised to Covid-19 and take actions in line with the existing Covid-19 safety protocols to protect themselves. In taking this approach to communication, it will be found that interpersonal communication and other channels of communication typical to a people, are essential complements to mass communication if effective sensitization campaign is to take place. The direct consequence of this sensitization according to Aliede (2011) cited in Ogbaeje (2013, p. 183) is an “energized mind and person who is more prepared to react to an issue more maturely, rationally and pragmatically.”

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Social Categories Theory propounded by Melvin De Fleur in 1970., cited in Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008, p. 132) the theory assumes that “media audience consists of different sub-groups. Members of a particular social category have identical values, interests and attitudes which will be different from those of other social categories. A person’s social category determines the media of mass communication he uses...”

A campaign of national, regional or local importance such as Covid-19, mounted to sensitize the public to the dangers threatening human existence, is destined to fail if cognizance is not taken of the socio-economic backgrounds and media literacy of the audience which eventually determine the accessibility of the media of communication and effective and efficient comprehension and utilization of the messages presented. In view of the foregoing, the socio-economic status of individuals in the society is a single most important factor in the medium of communication. This underscores the relevance of social categories theory to this study.

Overview of Covid-19

Coronavirus is a zoonotic disease, that is communicable between animals and humans. Coronavirus is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). A novel coronavirus was identified by Chinese authorities in January, 2020 and was temporarily named “2019-nCoV”. According to Santos, (2020),CoV are large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. This new strain of coronavirus has not been previously identified in humans. It was first reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 31st December 2019 in Wuhan, China (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). The new virus was subsequently named as the “Covid-19”.

In January, 2020, WHO declared the strange disease outbreak in humans a public health emergency of international concern. At that time, there were 98 cases and no death. When it became clear that the disease was spreading quickly over a wide area outside China, WHO declared the coronavirus outbreak as Pandemic. By then more than 118,000 cases had been reported in 114 countries and 4,291 deaths recorded. Globally, the coronavirus is affecting 220 countries and territories. Also, 246,902,465 confirmed cases, 5,007,600 deaths and 223,658,415 recovered cases have been reported as of 30th October, 2021 (www.worldometers.info).

Covid-19 Pandemic: Government Response and Effect on the Society

Coronavirus, a global disease outbreak that has killed millions of people all over the world, ravaged economies of both the powerful and less powerful countries and impoverished millions of people, particularly, in developing countries, was detected in Nigeria in 2020. According to National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), within the first 30 days (February 27 and March 27, 2020) of Covid-19 outbreak in Nigeria, it was observed that 70.0% of

individuals who tested positive to Covid-19 were male and 30.0% were female. Their ages ranged 31-50 years were the most affected (39.0%). About 44% (101) of the cases were imported and 15.0% patients were known contact cases. According to NCDC, within the first 30 days (February 27 and March 17, 2020) of Covid-19 outbreak in Nigeria, it was observed that 70.0% of individuals tested positive for Covid-19 were male and 30.0% were female. Their ages ranged between 30 and 60 years. People aged 31-50 years were the most affected (39.0%). About 44% (101) of the cases were imported and 15.0% patients were known contacts of cases.

Upon the detection of the index cases, the NCDC activated a multi-sectional National Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) to oversee the national response to Covid-19. Subsequently, the Presidential Task Force (PTF) for coronavirus control was inaugurated on March 9, 2020. The PTF announced that travellers from 13 Covid-19 high-risk countries be restricted from entering the country. Other measures to stem the tide of coronavirus spread were also put in place.

Nigeria is among the vulnerable African countries, given the weak state of health care system. There are still communities without sufficient health care facilities and health care workers or lack of them. As of 30th October, 2021, Nigeria recorded 211,678 confirmed cases, 203,089 recoveries and 2,802 deaths (www.ncdc.gov.ng). These alarming figures of confirmed cases, recovered and deaths indicate that it's a serious threat to human existence.

Communication and Covid-19 Awareness

Communication is a veritable instrument for the transformation of the individual and the society. A campaign for attitudinal change can be a failure unless there is a well-articulated communication programmes designed to convey messages by which people will bring themselves to yield to the information presented.

Fundamentally, the role of communication process in the fight against Covid-19 can be seen in threefold. First, communication is useful in providing people with information about Covid-19 outbreak. In this role, communications are used to educate people about possible health issues associated with Covid-19 and to engender positive public perception of the disease. Second, People are taught about the modes of transmission and provided with information for personal safety and the safety of others, including information about the availability of medical facilities, where and when to seek medical attention. Third, communication plays essential role in informing the populace about the availability of coronavirus vaccines and where to obtain them. It is essential also that people are persuaded to change their mind-sets about coronavirus vaccines in order to avail themselves for vaccination. Communication is thus, important in persuading and opening channels among people and between people and leaders so that new ways of doing things to contain the prevailing national calamity are possible.

Strategic Role of Government in Communication Programmes for Public Enlightenment

Attitudinal change cannot take place in isolation. Considering the state of illiteracy and the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, the basic needs and values of the people, and the negative public perception of government's response to covid-19 pandemic, it stands to reason that without effective communication, the goals of government toward the disease may not be accomplished. This is necessary to facilitate public persuasion and support for all government's programmes and processes aimed at controlling the spread of Covid-19 and cushioning its effects on the populace. Accordingly, the government's deliberate and sustained effort to the following strategic communication programmes are fundamental to the promotion of positive public perceptions of government's approaches to the problem and creation of more awareness of Covid-19 pandemic:

- **Decentralization of the Media of Communication:**

Significant campaign messages to create awareness of Covid-19 and the enormity of the problems associated with it are unrealistic unless the channels of communication are decentralized. Sensitization messages relayed from the national or state centres to the rural audience is unlikely to create the desired impact. Baran (2002) argues that decentralized communication system is potentially more responsive to local environment in which they operate.

In decentralizing the mass media, it requires the government to establish a small-scale, interactive and participative media forms in strategic centres in the rural areas to ensure public accessibility to the media and wider spread of campaign messages for robust results. Second, the establishment of local government information centres for effective coordination of campaign programmes and other media activities to create greater public awareness of Covid-19 is paramount. At this juncture, the decentralized communication systems according to Baran (2002) are potentially more responsive to the local environments in which they operate.

- **Popular Participation in Campaign Programmes:**

The community involvement in the campaign activities is potentially necessary for both the government and the community. The community participation in campaign programmes can lead to integration of various local information systems that are typical to the people which can increase the effectiveness of the campaign efforts as well as elicit higher level of commitment.

It is essential that the information officers who serve in the local areas should be empowered to involve community leaders, youth leaders, religious leaders, and the representatives of groups for the sole aim of taking the campaign messages to the door-step of every individual. The collaborative efforts would produce manifold benefits – greater pool of knowledge and information, greater number of approaches to the campaign through inputs from the people, personal commitment to the success of the awareness programmes, and wider spread of campaign information. Jones (2004) asserts the people who are expected to implement group decisions should be involved in choosing the course of action because it creates a psychological ownership of the decision. It should be realized that the people from the community have relevant information about the basic needs, values, and beliefs of their people which could operate to determine the effect of any campaign. Involving them in campaign activities is not only likely to eliminate tendencies which may evoke negative responses from the people but also serve as a motivation. Chiles and Zorn (2002), argue that people are motivated to work hard toward a goal they have helped to develop. This approach is more likely to increase the people's intensity, direction and persistence of effort towards attaining the set goal of the campaign.

- **Use of Appropriate Media of Communication**

- a) Traditional Media:**

There is a consensus among mass communication scholars that in the developing societies the mass media are urban centred. They are therefore, not sufficient for effective campaigns in the rural areas. Indeed, with the benefits, values and attitudes which characterize the inhabitants of the rural areas and their perception of mass media information, there is a good reason to expect a strong resistance to mass communicated messages. It can be an impossible task to influence, control or convert a large number of low-income, poorly educated or uneducated, uninformed and isolated majorities of the population into an informed citizenry by the mass media alone. As Ineji (2013) has observed, messages transmitted by impersonal sources such as the mass media are often greeted with

hostility and scepticism unlike the indigenous media which are familiar to the rural audience. Apart from credibility and acceptability embedded in indigenous media messages, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of messages are not likely to occur. The more the rural people are exposed to traditional media information the more interested they become in the matter advocated and the more strongly they become to feel about it. On the basis of this postulation, indigenous or traditional media are essential complements to mass media if awareness and understanding of the issues canvassed for are the goals of the campaign.

According to Ude(2013), the traditional media are indigenous channels of communication which operate as part of the people's culture. It is further contended that they facilitate a two-way interactional communication among people in rural and even urban settings. Some of the various forms of indigenous channels of communication that can be utilized to create awareness for Covid-19 are music, folk-media, drama and drums. Tery (2017), states that music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent. Elton John, a popular British music icon once said that music has a healing power and ability to take people out of themselves for a moment. Music can be incorporated in an integrated approach to create awareness. It is important in most people's lives independent of their cultural origins. Therefore, awareness for Covid-19 can be built into music. One of the most obvious is the lyrical content of the song. In this precarious situation, music can enforce conformity to Covid 19 safety protocols, contribute to the positive development of people's mindset toward covid-19 and promote cooperation of the people toward a common goal. It is one of the best ways to communicate messages across to influence acceptance of government's programmes and actions for the welfare of the people. In line with this submission, Ineji (2012) states that:

Music pervades all activities of the African societies. It encompasses the people's history, its value is in knowledge of social customs; it involves participation, it is spiritual and economic because it involves participation and demonstrates the non-material in the material; it is a healer and counsellor because of its therapeutic powers; it is a source of change from within because it is a meeting of traditional values and factors of change. Music symbolizes artistic experience, creativity, expression, spiritualism and function. Like mass communication, music can inform, educate and entertain. It can satirize, extol, praise good deeds, etc. During group work music can encourage or motivate people.

This postulation shows that the use of folk songs and pop music can exert an overwhelming influence on the people and inspire them to accept change. The musical performance by Sunny Ade and Onyeka Onwenu proved highly successful in campaign against the spread of HIV in the late 80s. Music has such huge potential to communicate messages that influence desirable actions as a result of the people's exposure to the persuasive messages presented.

b) Interpersonal Communication:

The early development communicators hypothesized that mass exposure to the mass media could make the people of the Third World to be aware of their problems and inspired to take actions to do something about them. Although this sounded plausible, it has long been found that in developing societies, mass media spread and consumption of the mass media messages have not been very effective, particularly in the rural cities. This argument enjoys the support of the findings of Hanson and Maxcy (1999), that:

When individuals in developing nations, who had an innovation like a weed spray, a new crop variety, or family planning, were asked the source/channel through which they had learned about the new idea, the

mass media were almost never reported. Interpersonal channels with peers totally predominated in diffusing the innovation.

It seems logical that that if the use of the mass media to achieve social objectives is to have any impact at all, interpersonal communication is vital as a support to the mass media. This corroborates Nwuneli's (1986) assertion cited in Nwabueze, Obasi and Obi (2013, p.39), that "if one anticipates a major attitude changes in favour of social development programmes, interpersonal channels of communication situations in meetings, clubs, festivals, and informal gathering must be initiated to complement the modern mass media even some folk media".

- **Use of Appropriate Language:**

If language, both spoken and written, is the primary-code of human communication, illiteracy is a major obstacle to the consumption of mass media products. Inability to comprehend what is transmitted through the mass media is a serious barrier to message effectiveness. Therefore, the medium of expression adopted in the transmission of campaign programmes for the rural audience is critical for the issues canvassed. Less emphasis on the use of English language is more likely to achieve the goals of any campaign designed to influence attitude change. It is imperative that campaign programmes be presented more in languages or dialects understandable to the people to enhance effective consumption of campaign messages.

CONCLUSION

Communication is a fundamental force in crisis intervention and the means that undergirds the process of achieving the desired goals. It is the keystone in mobilizing the people and encouraging them to support programmes for the general good of the society.

Today, Nigeria is facing a perilous situation brought by the outbreak of Covid-19. The rapid spread of the disease presents an unprecedented challenges to public health; prompting the collaboration efforts of state and national governments to ameliorate the problem also requires communication intervention. It is believed that media campaign to sensitize the people about Covid-19 and persuade them to yield to the issues canvassed will help to stem the tide of corona virus spread.

The study notes that a sizeable portion of the population live below the country's poverty line. The conditions under which the people exist can undermine the effectiveness of mass media campaign. It is reiterated that the medium of communication is fundamental to effective message delivery to all socio-economic groups. In order to achieve a robust result in the campaign against Covid-19, there is need to move away from the culture of focusing primarily on the mass media for message dissemination.

This study asserts that the vulnerable groups in the urban and rural cities, who cannot access or consume mass media information about Covid-19, can be reached through various communication media forms. Such a deliberate approach to communication is germane to the success of the campaign against Covid-19.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that:

1. The national, state and local governments and stakeholders in the health sector should embark on more intensive, aggressive and regular mass media campaign activities against Covid-19 for messages sustainability.
2. The governments should be more rural-focused in the campaigns against Covid-19 by decentralizing the mass media. Setting up of small-scale interactive and participative media in strategic local areas and creating an enabling environment for the private individuals' or groups' involvement will produce robust results.

3. Considering the socio-economic backgrounds of media audience in both urban and rural cities, appropriate indigenous channels of communication typical to a people should be employed in spreading campaign messages. This will enhance access to information channels and comprehension of messages presented.
4. A language both spoken and written by the people should be used message dissemination. This will enhance the comprehension of messages and increase message effectiveness.

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